A Critical Analysis of Folk Arts of Mithila

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Folk arts by its nature is a visual commentary on or a concrete manifestation of human thoughts and thinking. The village artists in their creation have preserved the thoughts and forms of by gone ages, with all the vitality and inspiration of the conciousness that brought them into existence. Folk arts, therefore, is a very precious heritage in the culture of the people of Bihar and particularly in Mithilā region.

The ancient land of Bihar, consisted of main centres, namely, Vaiśālī, Aṅga, Magadha and Mithilā. This Mithilā region was the centre of cultural regeneration and was confined to be the seat of imposing and elegant folk arts. Mithilā is mainly dominated and shaped by the religious motifs, which is of universal nature. According to S. K. Roy[1] "the relation between art and religion is a universal feature. And in the religion of Brata, art is indispensable means of communication between the devotees and Gods". The Mithilā folk art can be classified into several categories. In the first category i. e. Aṅkika (अंकिक), the folk paintings (Bhūmichitra or Bhūmiśobhā and Bhitichitra) has got much importance. The Sanskrit word 'chitra' is generally used for painting. Many Sanskrit, Buddhist and Jain texts refer to painting (Ālokhyaṁ) as one of the prominent arts of sixty four traditional arts of India. Vātsyāyana[2] mentions six main limbs of painting i. e. (1) knowledge of appearances; (2) correct preception, measure and structure of forms; (3) the action of feelings on forms; (4) infusion of grace, artistic representation; (5) similitudes; (6) and artistic measures of using the brush and colours. In Mithilā region, the wall painting (Bhitti chitra) and floor painting (Bhūmi Śobhā) are very popular village art in folk-women of this region. This village art is prevalent

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1 The Bratas of Bengal, Introduction, p. IV.

2 रूपभेदाः प्रमाणानि भावलावण्य योजनम्,
सादृश्यं वर्णिकाभंगं इति चित्रं षडंगकम् ॥

in almost all regions of Bihar with certain modifications. In Bhojapuri speaking area of Bihar, the word 'urehanā' has been used for making wall paiting. This is generally drawn on the outer and inner walls of houses or on the walls of Kohabara (the honeymoon room for new bride and bridegroom). But in the land of King Janaka, the folk women usually prepare paintings on three specific places of the house i. e. the Gosaunī-ghara (room for kula devatā), the kohabara-ghara (honeymoon room for newly married couple) and kohabara-ghara ka koniyā (corridor or out side kohabar-ghara).

From the study of Bāṇa's[3] Harsha charita, we learn that in the kohabara-ghara of Grahavarmā (brother in-law of Harsha), the figure of gods were painted by the women. Bāṇa[4] further informs us that on the gate of the outer of Vāsagṛha (inner apartment of Grahavarmā, the figure of Kāmadeva and his consort Rati and Prīti were painted. Similar to the above description we also find the reference to such paintings in folk lores of Mithilā and Bhojapuri regions of this state. In one Maithili[5] folklore we find the description about the painting of kohabara ghara by the three wives of the King Dasarath. From one Bhojapuri folklore[6], we learn that Sarahaja (the wife of brother-in-law) is going to paint the honeymoon room with figure of Bamboo, lotus leaves (locally called Purayin) and motifs of auspicious signs (māṅgalika-chihna or suhāga). In another folklore[7] we have a description for making figure of four birds and one pair of goose on the wall of kohabara. In Mithilā region, such paintings are practised by the folk women of upper-class (kulīna-khānadāna), such as Brāhmaṇs, kāyasthas etc. The lower caste people express their artistic sentiments and skill by utility articles. Some of there are prepared for the use in festivities of upper caste people. In Mithilā region Brahmin's painting have a delicate meandering lines, which encloses areas of brilliant colours (pink, green, red, yellow, etc.).

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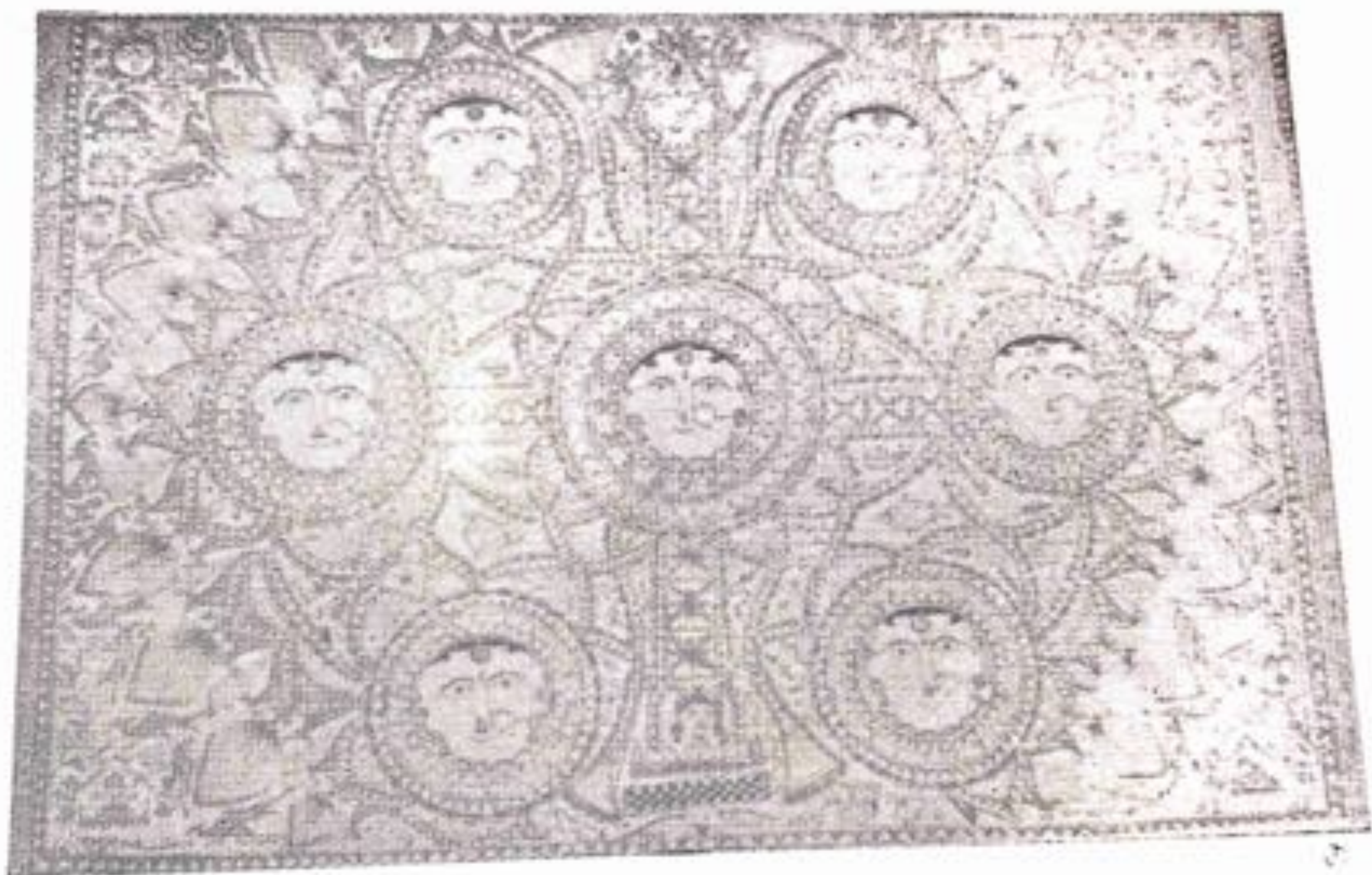
3 Harsha-Charita, Sāṁskṛtika Adhyayana, p. 83.
4 Ibid. p–85.
5 Maithili-Lokagīta, Song No. 14 p. 145.
6 Bhojapuri Grāmagīta, Song No. 239, p. 135.
7 चारि चिरैया जोड़ी हंस रे............. ।



Lord Gaṇeśa in folk painting of Mithilā (p. 872)



Folk Painting of Mithilā : Ladies in dancing pose (p. 87)



Wall paintings of Mithilā on the occasion of marriage : *kohbarghar* (p. 872)



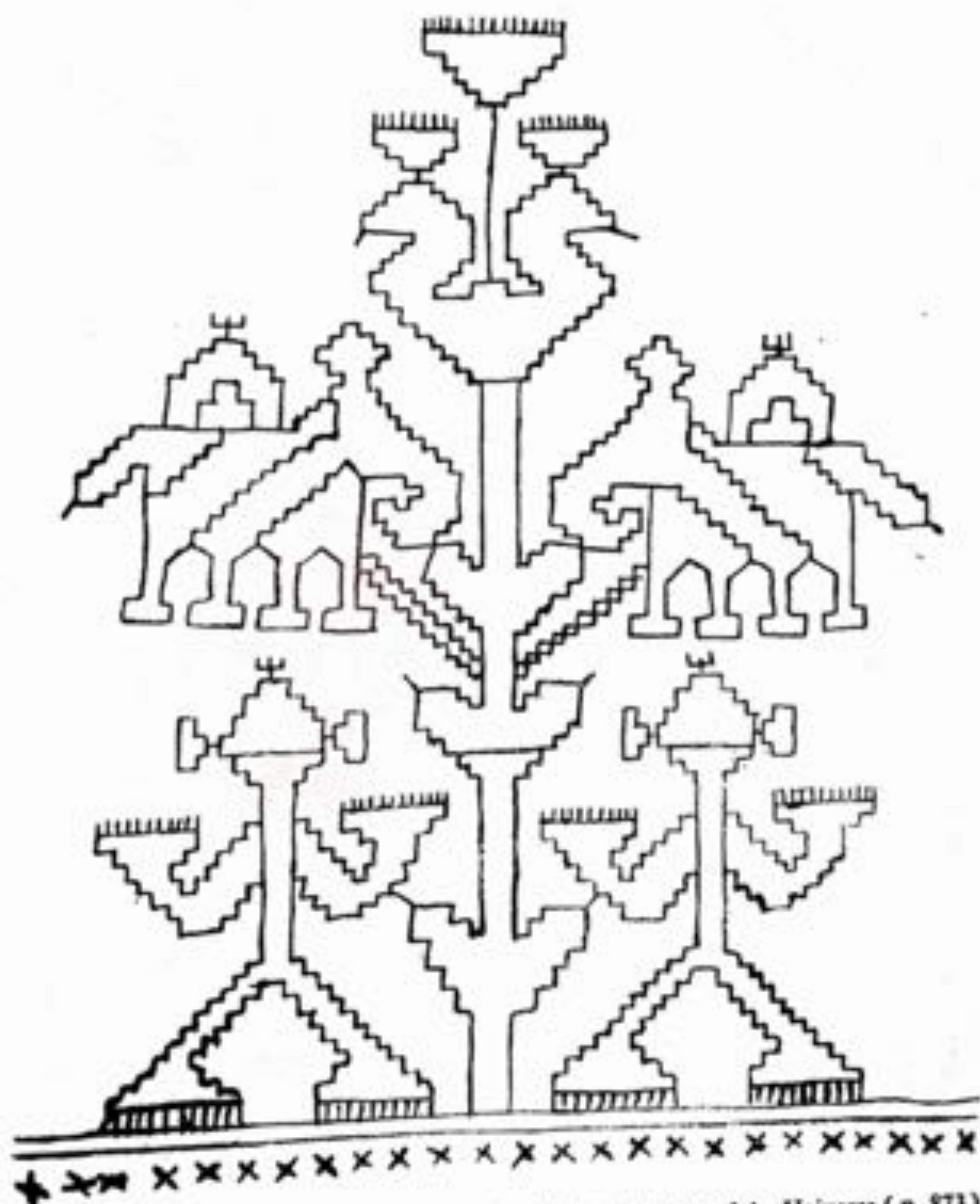
Folk paintings of Mithilā : Couple riding on elephant (p. 872)



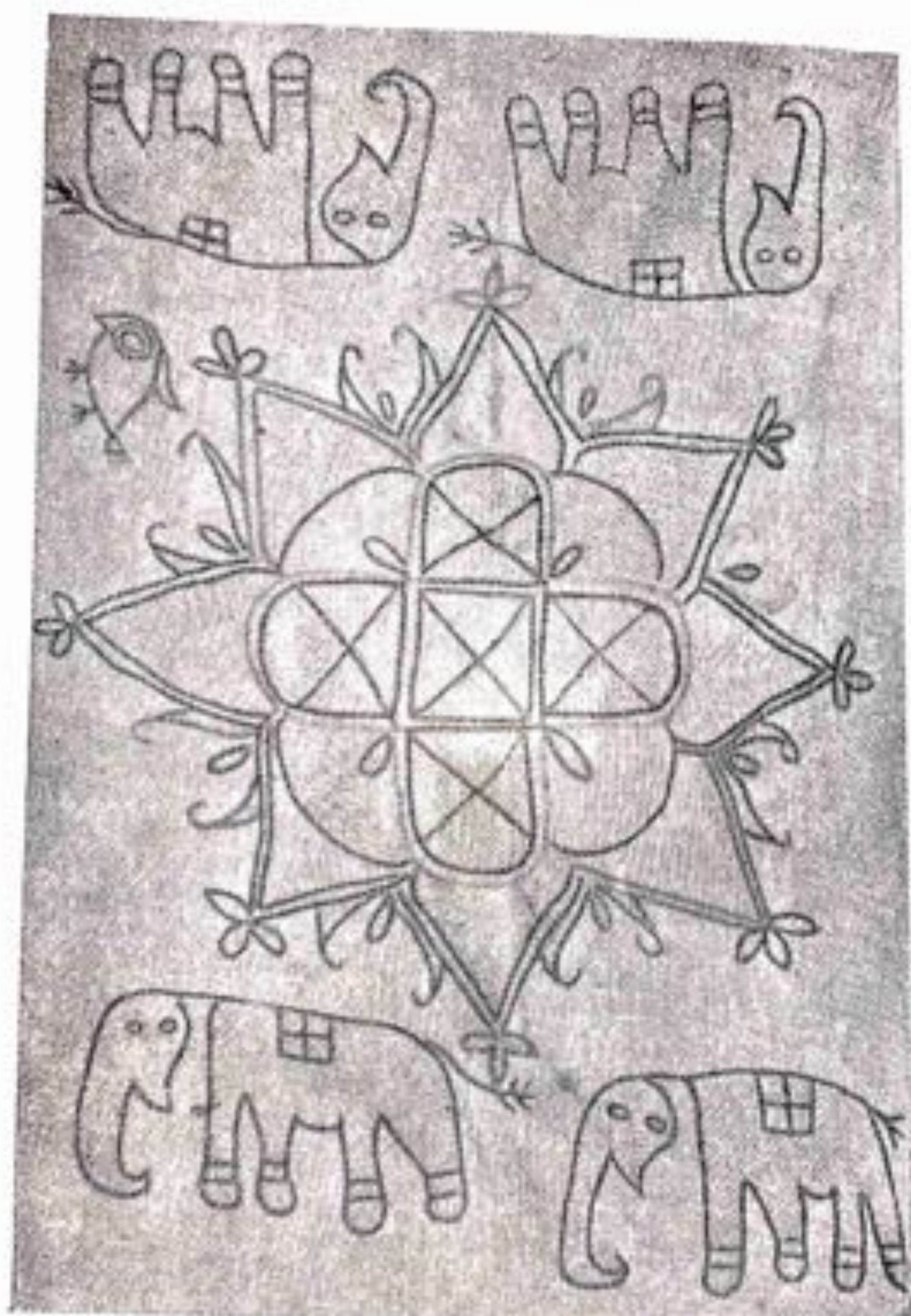
Folk Paintings of Mithilā : Kṛṣṇa with Gopīs (p. 873)



Folk Painting of Mithilā : Goddess Durgā with her vāhana (p. 873)



Mithilā Embroidery : Symbol of the origin and development of the Universe (p. 873)



Mithilā Embroidery : Sujani design (p. 873)

The Bhitti-chitra is generally painted in fast colours. The folk artists of Mithilā usually apply numerous colour-scheme and its varieties. They know how to prepare the mixed colours and fast colours for their use. Nāṭyaśāstra[8] has given a long list of colours, and the way of mixing the different colours : probably folk-artists were aware of these colour schemes and its technique.

The subject-matter of such paintings can be grouped into three types— religious, secular and decorative. The religious figures include the figure of composite gods i. e., Śiva and Pārvati, Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, Viṣṇu in all incarnatory forms, Durgā, Kāli, Gaṇesha, Kāma, Śeṣa-Nāga, Gaja-Lakshmī, Kṛṣṇa with Gopīs etc. These figures represent the idea of welfare and time (Śiva), idea of house-holder, enjoyment and work (Viṣṇu), earthly welfare, wealth and prosperity (Lakshmī), idea of sexual enjoyment, concept of love, union, youth and desire (Kāma), idea of auspiciousness (Gaṇeśa), etc. Thus, all the above mentioned gods and goddesses some how or other inspired the life of the new couple. In second category, we can place various symbols of fertility and prosperity in form of elephant, horse, fish, lion, parrot, sun, moon, bamboo, great circular lotus with leaves, pāna (betel), peacock, goose, pālki with khārā, birds, different flowers and creepers, swastika, śaṅkha, etc. These figures have their own significance i. e., the sense of royalty and richness (palki, elephant, horse), idea of long life (Sun and Moon), idea of welfare and peace (peacock, goose), Śubha-Lakshaṇa (lotus, pāna), future progeny (Vaṅsa-Vṛddhi-Bamboo) etc.

Bhūmi[9] Śobhā (Arippan) has different names in different regions of India. Such as Alpanā in Bengal, Māṇḍalā in Rajasthan, Rangoli in Gujarāta, Chauka-Purana in Bhojapuri area of Bihar and eastern U. P. and Arippan in Mithilā region. This is one of the popular branch of folk paintings which

8 Nāṭyaśāstra, ch. 21 Śloka 60–65.
सितपीतसमायोगः पाण्डुवर्णं इति स्मृतः सितरक्तसमायोगात् पद्मवर्णं इति स्मृतः ॥ सितनीलसमायोगः कापोतो नाम जायते पीतनीलसमायोगात् हरितो नाम जायते ॥ नीलरक्तसमायोगात् काषायो नाम जायते रक्तपीतसमायोगात् गौरस्त्वभिधीयते ॥ एते संयोगजा वर्णा ह्युपवर्णास्तथा परे त्रिचतुर्वर्णसंयुक्ता बहवः परिकीर्तिताः दुर्बलस्य च भागौ द्वौ नीलवर्णादृते भवेत् नीलस्यैको भवेद्भागश्चत्वारोऽन्ये स्मृताः । वर्णस्य बलवत्त्वं नीलस्यैव हि कीर्तितः.....॥

9 Memoirs of Arch. S. I. No. 73, p. 97.

still survives with all its old traditions. In Brahma Purāṇa,[10] the word Bhūmi-Śobhā and in Naiṣadha[11]-charita the word Ālepana is used. Hence, the word Arippan is corrupt form of Ālepana. It is prepared on the auspicious occasion either pūjā, parva, brata or at the time of different saṁskāras. During festivities, the women folk of this part are in habit of drawing Alpanā on floor, walls and courtyards with a small piece of cloth soaked in an emulsion of ground rice. The motifs of the designs are similar to the folk paintings. According to Ray[12] "the purpose of this Aripana line drawing on the floor was originally the cultivated land fertile and fruitful by magical performances. Primitive women were inspired to draw a city or a field in Alpanā, for their own benefit and subsistence and not merely for artistic decorations." After perusal of several Arippans, I have come to this conclusion that the main purpose behind these line-drawings on the floor was just to apart the pure and dirty one, because most of the arippans have the religious background. This arippan shows many different shapes and forms. The outline of arippan has got Tāntrika influence and inner features reflect the Śākta-creed. For example, the red point shows prominence of Mother-goddess and three inner triangles refers to Gaurī or Pārvatī. The subject matter of this painting are religious, and decorative one.

The embroidery of Mithilā is an embellishment of any material shaped and designed by a needle and thread. It occupies important place in the history of Indian folk-art. Mithilā embroidery, if taken in broad sense, is not simply the work of a needle and thread but it is artistically implemented ornamentation. This village of embroidery is classified into three catagories i. e. kasidā, applique and sujani. There is a popular traditional custom in our Hindu families of this region, that after marriage of a girl (on the occasion of Durāgaman), the bride has to carry the different variety of clothes embroidered along with some other articles designed by herself or by mother or grand-mother to husband's house into wooden boxes. This wedding gift (a piece of

10 Brahma Purāṇa, 18–12.
11 Naiṣadha Charita, ch. II–26.
12 Vratas of Bengal, p. 42 and 44.

folk art supposed to be the aide-memories to her husband's home) is a symbolical representation of maternal love, pride, care and devotion. Besides this, the women folk utilise their leisure hours by adhering to the pursuit of art, which agreeably satisfy their urge for artistic expression. In Mithilā region, the village embroidery is designed in three different styles i. e. Ghachuā, Bharilā and Taganuā varieties. Ghachuā is a kind of chain stitch design. The word Ghachuā is probably a corrupt form of the word "Kachuā", a kind of insect which moves in a chain forms. In Bhojapuri area, this variety is called "Sikariyā variety." 'Bharilā' is another kind of folk embroidery. The folk women arrange this design on the entire surface of the cloth. This work is designed by horizontal, diagonal and vertical stitches and produced various patterns of geometrical designs. This Bharilā Kasidā is very much similar to the Bāgha and phulkari embroidery of the Punjab. The third section is known as "Taganuā variety." The word Taganuā indicates counting of thread. Thus, in this variety village woman sketch different designs on the clothes by pencil and filling it by counting the stitches. These Maithili folk embroidery is more or less secular in form and decorative in character. It follows the geometrical patterns of various shapes and sizes. It is said that the geometrical designs point to an early stage in matter of evolution of embroidery. In Maithili embroidery the symbolic birds, animal, and human motifs is distinctly prominent.

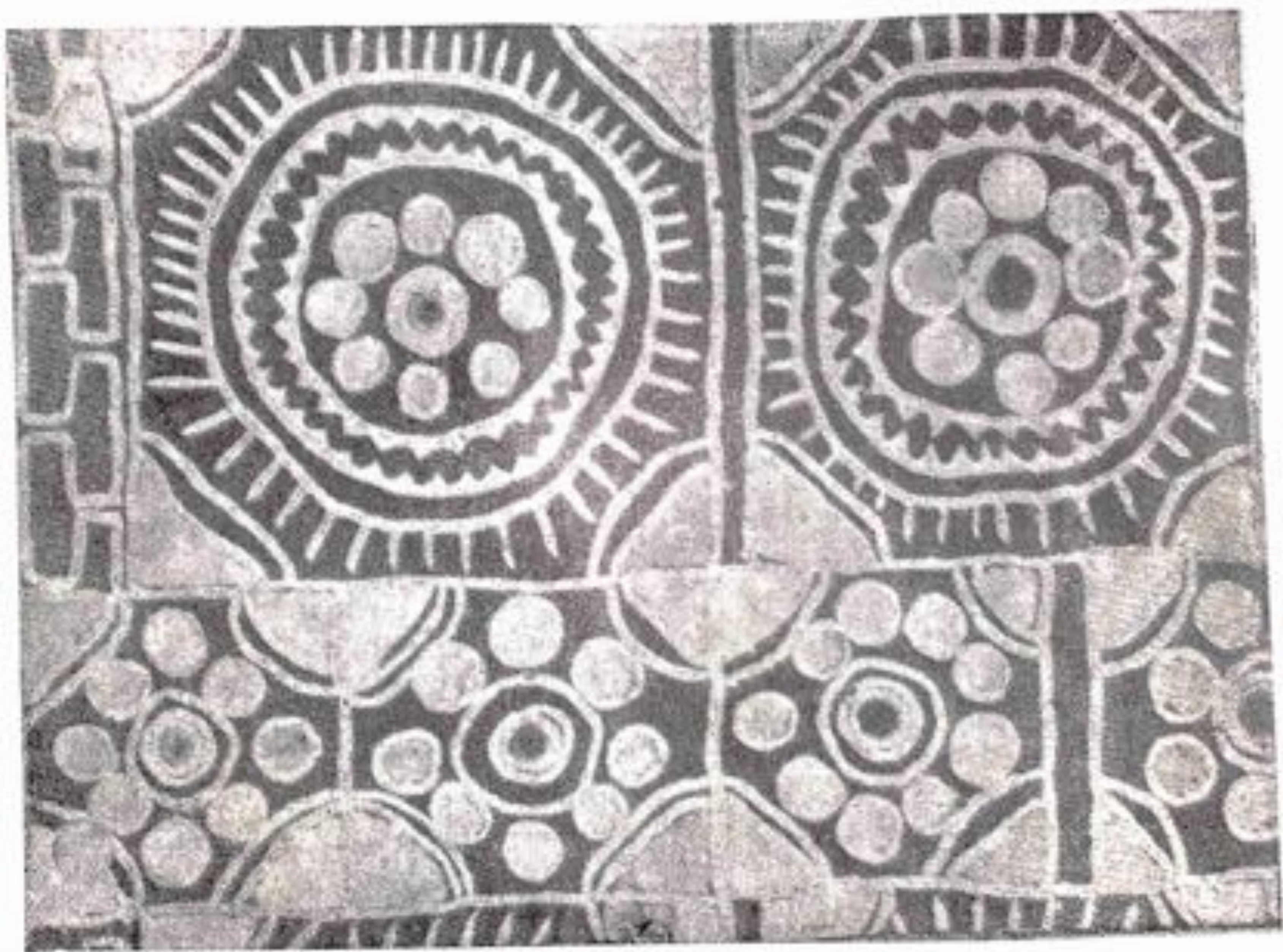
Applique work is another folk embroidery. From Abul Fazal's 'Ain-i-Akbari', we know that during the time of war or at the time of hunting (śikāra) the tents (Khemā or Tambū) with different types of brocades and patch work, were used. Sāmiyānā were prepared in those days with patch-work known as applique designs. In Mithilā area, two varieties of applique work namely 'Katawa' and strips material, are famous. In katawa variety, the cloth is cut out into different shapes and sizes and stitched to the background cloth with the help of needle and thread. The designs are taken from the natural surroundings as well as from social life of human being.

Sujanī is another variety of folk art. It is made up of torn clothes and the process of its manufacture is very simple one. Firstly, the several torn sāri and dhoti is stitched on four sides. Then after quilting the central portion, the Sujanī is stitched with coloured threads. The women folk make varieties

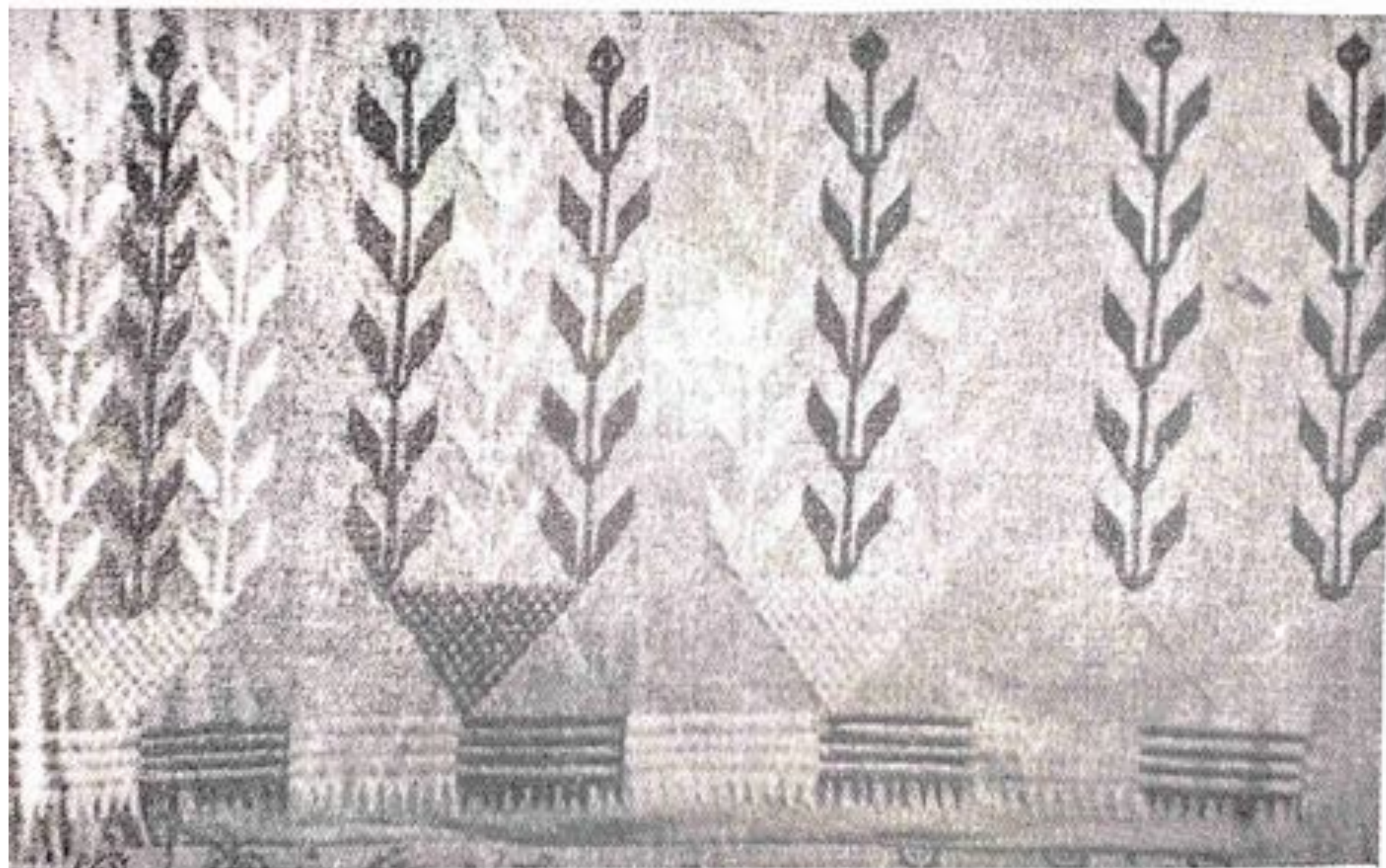
of designs on the border and in the middle portion of the Sujani. In making different designs the women use cross-stitches. The designs are of natural motifs like creeper, flower, lotus flower and plant with gamalā, different birds, animals. This Sujani is simple and boldering in perception. The material form of the Sujani design concerns with secular and decorative motifs and relates to every-day life.

Sikkiware is another folk art of Mithilā region. In this region folk women are engaged in preparing desired articles out of having golden colour sikki-gross. In agricultural society, the women of poor status prepare basket out of wheat and rice straw for storing grains and other things. In Mithilā area, the young maidens should know this art of sikki ware prior to their marriages. This sikki-grass grows in abundance during mansoon, it is a kind of long stemmed grass found in the waste land of north Bihar. The folkwomen generally dye the thin pieces of sikkigrass in many colours by ordinary process of dying (red, blue, black, green etc.). The sikkiware are, more or less, the creation of women's imagination, influenced by the traditions and religious beliefs. The Tāntrika influence can be noted prominently in snch works as Bhairava-chakra, Kāla-chakra etc. With utmost skill, the women prepare figures of religious Gods and Goddess, Panti (box), Mouni (basket), Chaṅgeri, Dagarā etc. Thus, women folk look at the nature, observe the flora and fauna, study the life of animal, birds and human features and they design different and diverse objects on these sikkiwares. An effort is now being made to reconstruct and develop this beautiful folk art as an industry and to pursuade the women to prepare the articles for commercialization. A centre has already been established at Manigāchi and Sursanda. Thus, it is a spontaneous product of Mithilā embibing the ancient folk spirit, guided and inspired by the religion and nature. It combines many qualities, richness, refinement and sense of compositions of colours. The varieties differ in minute details of this artistic preparation. It is developed as a utility and decorative folk art. It reflects the Maithila women's great qualities of head and heart, and love for beautiful objects.

Some Minor folk arts—There are many minor domestic arts which are in practice from time immemorial in Mithilā; namely doll making, application



Mithilā Embroidery with mica piece (p. 876)



Folk Embroidery : *Bharita* variety (p. 876)



Village cap , with Applique design (p. 876)



Sikkiware of Mithilā : Symbolic figure of the Sun god (p.876)



Sikkiware of Mithilā : Temple design (p. 877)



Sikkiware of Mithilā : *Changeri* (p. 877)



Sikkiware of Mithilā : *Panabaṭṭā* or *Pautī* (p. 877)



Sikkiware of Mithilā : Dancing peacock (p. 877)

of Mehadi in feet and palm; Mahavara in feet, and Godanā (tattooing) in hands, legs, forehead etc.

From Vātsyāyana's Kāmasūtra, we know that doll making was a popular folk art of Hindu society. He has referred to the word 'बालक्रीड़नकानि' for doll making art. It is very difficult to determine the origin of the doll making. The doll is usually understood to be a miniature of human figure representing a phase of life or character. It is mainly an object for children's play specially for those who are not even teen aged. The main purpose of this doll making is just to give the growing child (male or female) a means to develop its racial consciousness inherent in its national or domestic traditions. In every village of Bihar and particularly in Mithilā the folk women usually prepare the dolls for both the sexes. The process of doll making is very simple one. Only torn cloth and Bhushi (husk) are used to make dolls. In Mithilā area, the dolls are made by the folk-women, are much artistic than the dolls of Bhojpur area. The Maithili doll is called "Purātan Guḍiyā". The anatomical features are to some extent proportionate and dresses are generally dhoti, kurta, bagalbandi (or mirzayi) for male, and sari and blouses for female dolls. Generally, during the occasion of durāgaman (second-marriage) of the girl, these domestic dolls are send to the bridegroom's house as token of gift for the children of that family. Hence, it was the practice in Mithilā region that young maidens have to learn this art from their mother and grandmother. Thus, the doll accelerated the healthy growth of child's mental faculty as it comes in direct contact with the miniature of the realities of nature and it developed in children the sense of arts, harmony, colour sense, and beauty of form.

In ancient days, the beautifying of a person was considered to be an art. Subtle sense was explored and cultivated to respond to the ingeneous device of paint, perfumes and jewels. Mehadi (or Henā) had been known to Arab world since the most ancient times. The mummies of Egyptian kings showed the royal toe-hail dyed with deep ground red Henā. But in Mithilā area, the application of mehadi established its place as the aid to erotic beauty of women. In the paintings of Rajasthan, Mughal and Kāṅgrā schools, Mehadi is seen as decorating the hands and feet of the women. The prominent features

of Mehadi is its property of imparting cool to the body. The dark green leaves are plucked, washed and grounded to the thick paste with water. This paste applied by straw needle which is always cold and its odour resembles strangely, the aroma of wet earth. The folk women prepare several designs on the palm of the ladies, such as, creeper, flowers, chakra and other flora and fauna, symbolical representation to human figurine, geometrical shapes etc.

Like mehadi, the application of mahāvara is often used in higher society of Mithilā. Even the folk women of lower strata used it on auspicious occasion like muṇḍan ceremony, vivāha or on the other festive occasions. In Bhojpuri speaking area cf Bihar, the application of mahāvara or āltā is called "goḍa-Bharanā" (decaration of feet). In Sanskrit literature the word "ālaktaka" has been used for mahāvara. In ancient days the application of mahāvara was very essential for court dancers or the dancers of the temple, and the prostitute. The ladies of the village generally applied this mahāvara on the upper portion or side of the feet. Usually the designs are of creepers, small flowers, swastika and some other geometrical designs.

The tattooing or goḍanā folk art is very ancient one. In olden days goḍanā was one of the major means to decorate the body and to make the physical structure attractive one. In different regions of Bihar and particularly in Mithilā, after marriage of young maidens, the tattooing is considered to be an essential thing because it is a symbol or insignia of saubhāgya. The persons who are engaged in tattooing work, made different and diverse designs by the help of thin needle and colour. Firstly, they sank the needle in black colour (prepared with the miture of milk and dhaturā fruit) and then they pinched it in a particular place in the body of village girls and gradually they made the designs. Really it was a very painstaking process. The designs are generally of geometrical shapes (square, circle, vindu etc.) flowers, creepers, small birds etc. With the progress of civilization the tattooing is in the way of declining stage, but the writing of the name in the hands is still in practice in Bihar.

Thus, the Maithili folk artists have certain distinct characteristics of their own. They reveal the creative urge of the folk community and disclose their

aesthetic senses. These village arts have embodied the accumulated experiences handed down traditionally from mother to daughter and from daughter to grand-daughters. These traditional arts perfectly reveal our ancient concept of "Satyaṁ-Śivaṁ-Sundaraṁ". They are precious legacy and valuable part of our cultural heritage. Thanks to the Government of Bihar, where every possible effort is being taken to recollect and preserve the specimens of Maithili heritage in 'Crafts Museum' of Patna (Bihar).

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